

SPORTS AFIELD

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JULY/AUGUST 2014

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GRIM REPERCUSSIONS

Legal hunting is becoming a victim of the well-intentioned clamor to stop Africa's poaching epidemic.



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The benefits of legal, regulated hunting for elephants are getting lost in the rush to stop a serious poaching epidemic.

Sustainable use of wildlife seems to be under siege around the world. Crises of ever-greater complexity thwart our efforts to keep wild nature with us, and safeguarding the wildlife upon which we have relied for untold generations is becoming ever more difficult. The reality is that when striving to respond to such challenges we often run the risk of developing policies that may inadvertently endanger wildlife and further undermine conservation itself.

A case in point is the unprecedented attention now focused upon the illegal wildlife trade. As the bloody streams of profit rising from illegal killing and trafficking of Africa's iconic wildlife pour over the global conscience, a great tremor is taking form. From the killing fields where elephants and rhinos are being poached in unprecedented numbers, and their horns and tusks hacked away, there is a rising storm of international concern. Its force has been sufficient to rouse the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council, the U.S. President, the Royal

Family of Great Britain, the G8, the European Parliament, a host of range-state governments, international non-governmental organizations, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to action, or to intense discourse at the very least.

Why has this happened? The most important single reason is that the illegal killing of elephants and rhinos has truly reached an alarming scale. For African elephants, it threatens not only the survival of smaller populations in parts of Central Africa but, if unchecked, could even imperil the large populations in eastern and southern Africa, populations once thought secure. Based upon evidence presented at an elephant summit convened by the government of Botswana and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in December 2013, Africa could lose one fifth of its remaining elephant populations within a decade unless corrective action is taken to curb the illegal harvest. Thus there certainly is a very serious conservation concern and one that must be addressed quickly and decisively.

In addition, there is growing evidence and reasonable concern that organized crime and militant groups are behind the procurement and transnational shipment of most elephant ivory and rhino horn. Their efforts are, in turn, fostered by corruption at many levels. Such violence and corruption serve to undermine good governance, the rule of law,

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and peaceful coexistence that are critical to conservation efforts. Under such circumstances, the lack of effective wildlife enforcement and the lack of adherence to international laws and policies means that illegal trade proceeds under circumstances where few coordinated regulatory frameworks to address the problem actually function well, if at all. It is a recipe for conservation collapse.

In this context, the supply chain of illegal wildlife killing and trade often begins in those regions where the social, economic, and political environments are the most vulnerable—regions that have fewer effective institutions and can least afford further disruption by violence and corruption. These, of course, are the very circumstances that organized crime and militias seek to exploit. Given this backdrop of violence, poverty, and vulnerability, it is perhaps understandable why most discussions of this problem center upon better wildlife enforcement and efforts to shut down the demand for ivory and rhino horn. In other words, the emphasis is clearly upon stopping the illegal killing and trade and thereby saving the species in question—a straightforward enough equation, perhaps.

Regardless of how reasonable this emphasis may appear, we ought to remember that to the uninformed and concerned public, this message may imply that all wildlife trade is inherently problematic. Indeed it may imply that all harvest and use of wildlife of any kind is inherently negative for conservation—a message that is both incorrect and potentially damaging to all sustainable use-based conservation efforts, hunting included. Thus, while many with good intentions are working hard to protect Africa's elephants and rhinos, calling for an end to poaching and a ban on trade, it is vitally important that the entire context of wildlife use is pursued and presented in detail when these matters are discussed. The wider public can peruse such messaging in their morning paper or through

any number of social media forums and be significantly misled in their interpretation of realities on the ground.

This is especially true for those who are already confused or misinformed over the distinctions between poaching and legal hunting, for example, or see trophy hunting as a wasteful indulgence, or have no idea of how hunting contributes to conservation. In their eyes, banning all wildlife use may indeed seem like an attractive thing to do, especially when world leaders are suggesting approaches that appear to them to be inclined in this direction. It is imperative that such misconceptions are dispelled whenever they present themselves but especially now given the current international furor over elephants and rhino. We cannot afford to have these discussions, which focus on only a few iconic species in a time of crisis, overwhelm or undermine the very real conservation that can and has been achieved through sustainable-use approaches.

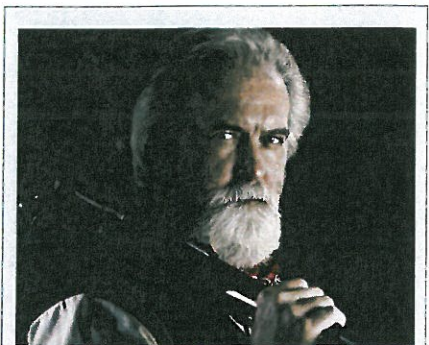
After all, the harvest and international trade in wildlife and other natural products is a long-established, generally well-policed, and economically significant activity that provides critical support for human communities across the globe. It includes not only food commodities such as fish and wildlife but also timber and many medicinal products extracted from animals and plants that are critical for treatment of human diseases. Indeed, despite our perceptual distance from food web realities, wildlife use remains critical for the day-to-day nutrition of rural people in many parts of the world and forms a cornerstone of their economic well-being as well. Wildlife use and sustainable development are indeed compatible and, for millions of people, wildlife is one of the only renewable commodities upon which they can depend.

This is a time for clear and prudent thinking. In pursuit of a solution to one conservation problem, we must not turn against or alienate the very people and

practices that offer wildlife and human communities their best long-term opportunities. Let us be very clear and remind people that it is the illegal take of wildlife we are speaking of when we discuss the current devastation of elephants and rhinos and the brutal engagements of organized crime syndicates and violence-dealing militias.

These excesses are a far cry from the legal frameworks we have created worldwide, which function to protect both wildlife and human cultures engaged in sustainable-use practices. From the communal conservancies of Namibia where trophy hunting has helped increase many wildlife species including the endangered black rhino, to the regulated harvest of markhor ibex in the tribal regions of Pakistan, and on to the legal trade in crocodile skins which have helped support conservation of those species, we have many well-established examples of how wildlife use and trade can contribute to conservation and human well-being.

We must not let the world forget these truths. If we do, the debate over poaching and illegal wildlife trade may well include legal hunting as one of its innocent victims.



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